

The Ontario Liquor Act.

*** A SERMON ***

PREACHED IN

St. Andrew's Church, Ottawa,

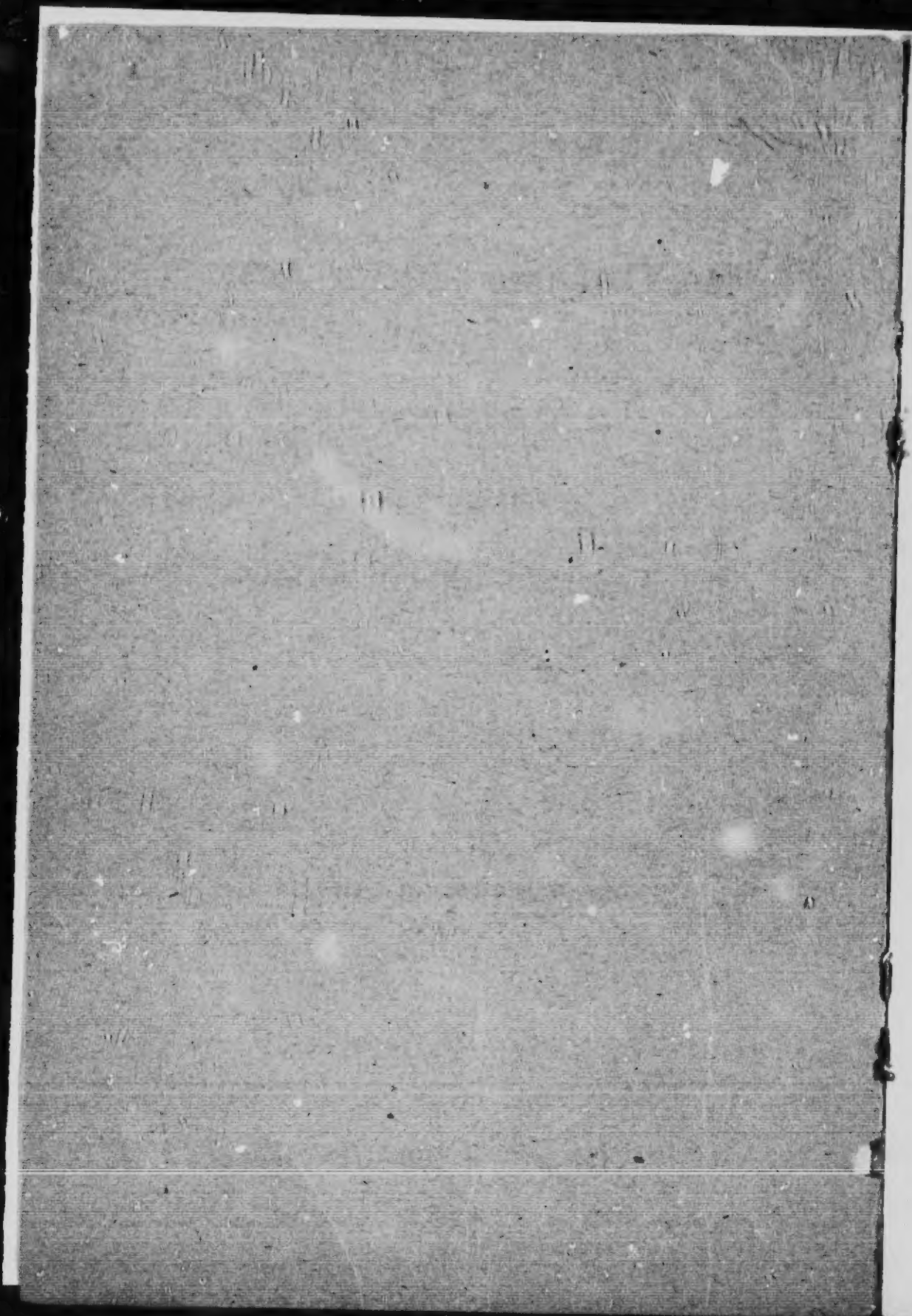
—ON—

SUNDAY EVENING, NOV. 23rd, 1902,

—BY—

REV. W. T. HERRIDGE, D.D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.



The Ontario Liquor Act.

*** A SERMON ***

PREACHED IN

St. Andrew's Church, Ottawa,

! —ON—

SUNDAY EVENING, NOV. 23rd, 1902,

—BY—

REV. W. T. HERRIDGE, D.D.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

ESTD 1880

0 910729

"Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things."

1st Cor. 9: 25.

Complaint is being made from various quarters that a good deal of indifference seems to exist in regard to the vote on the Ontario Liquor Act which is to be submitted to the electors on December 4th, and that it is hard work to stir up enthusiasm on the subject. If this be so, it is fitting to ask what are some of the reasons for comparative apathy on a matter which, from whatever standpoint it is viewed, ought to be of some interest to the whole body of the people.

It would be possible, of course, to explain the whole thing by saying that the depraved human heart is never easily stirred to genuine activity on moral questions. God knows that we often pay more attention to concerns of relatively trifling importance than we do to the great problems of life. There is always need of voices to remind us of our highest obligations, and to wake to exercise our noblest faculties. But on this particular matter of temperance, I think it may be contended that Canadian sentiment is fairly well advanced. Indeed, from time to time, we have given so much thought to the subject, as, perhaps, to neglect other reforms which, to say the least, are equally essential to the social welfare. And some, in all honesty of purpose, I have no doubt, have tried to establish an ethical dividing-line, with all the sheep on the side of prohibition, and all the goats opposed to it.

From one point of view, the Act which is shortly to be voted on by the electorate may be regarded as a political manifesto, and this may help to cool enthusiasm in some cases. There are partizans so strong in their prejudice against everything which comes from the other side that they will always assume an attitude of more or less open hostility. And there are others, not blindly committed to the support of any party, who look with a certain measure of distrust upon the deeds of politicians, and "fear the Greeks even though bearing gifts." This may be an unfortunate state of affairs for which public men cannot be held as wholly responsible. Yet it is sometimes difficult to tell whether a measure looking towards any reform comes to the birth from high moral considerations, or simply at the dictates of mere political expediency. Instances are not unknown of a considerable divergence between pre-election promises and post-election performances. And therefore, you cannot wonder that many persons, not quite insane, are not prepared to view a political deliverance in the same light as an oracle from heaven. It is one thing to oppose popular sentiment in the interests of a high cause, and quite another to wait and see which way the wind blows before trimming the sails to catch it.

And then, again, assuming that the present Act, though not beyond criticism, is on the whole an excellent one, a good many who are interested in the cause of temperance doubt whether there is a reasonable prospect of enforcing it. On this point, past experience has not been particularly

reassuring. On the principle of choosing the least of two evils, the Scott Act and others of kindred nature have been in several cases repealed, because it was found that their constant violation led to greater evils than under a system of licenses. Every fair observer is obliged to admit that, so far, at least, local prohibition has not succeeded in prohibiting, and that some of the most pathetic types of drunkenness are to be seen in districts where the sale of liquor is illegal.

Of course, the fact that laws are broken is no sufficient argument in itself for keeping them out of the statute-book. The very existence of formal laws presupposes an imperfect state of things, and they would be no longer needed if everyone knew how to use his liberty. But while laws may be broken in some cases, it is quite clear that the great bulk of public sentiment must be in their favour or they could never be enforced at all. For example, the opinion that theft is a crime is general amongst us ; and while some men steal in such awkward ways as to come under the clutch of the law, most people think that they deserve whatever punishment is administered to them. Now, if something like the same opinion exists in regard to the sale or consumption of intoxicating liquors, there will be little difficulty in enforcing the most stringent laws. But, if it does not, enforcement will be impossible ; and a law constantly and flagrantly ignored is worse than no law at all. It remains to be seen what is the real strength of Canadian feeling on this subject ; but, in the meantime, any doubt in regard to it may

restrain the ardour of some of the very persons who most desire to see sobriety prevail amongst us.

And then, again, there are divergent views on the precise scope of legislation on this matter. Of course there are those who have obvious reasons for resisting the passage of this Act or any other like it. But many whose own temperance cannot be called in question, and who are eager to serve the best interests of their fellows, are not inclined to put undue emphasis on legal enactments. Everyone is agreed that legislation cannot cover the whole field of iniquity. A man may have a legal right to do what is morally wrong, provided he inflicts no injury on others of which legal cognisance can be taken. We cannot legislate men out of atheism or avarice or hypocrisy. Distinction must be made between crime and vice, and while we trust to the machinery of the State to check the one, we have to look in other directions for the overthrow of the other. This is a world of moral trial, no matter where you live, or under what conditions ; and therefore we must allow without prejudice any fair debate as to the function of law in the premises. Some will think that its interference should be almost unlimited. Others will think that since legislation is not intended to put an end to the heroism of personal discipline, it should be exercised with a wise moderation, and only when there is a direct menace to the general safety. Now, whatever we may think, let us at least be fair enough to acknowledge that those who differ from us may be as honest and sincere as we are.

It seems to me that more charity and less denunciation is needed in dealing with this subject. I wish to enter a protest against the wholesale abuse of the advocates of total abstinence and prohibition by those who take another view. No doubt there are intemperate men among the champions of temperance, but one gets tired of hearing that said so often. No doubt there are fanatics among them, but so there are everywhere. The worth of a cause is to be estimated not by the worst but by the best exponents of it ; and it will be at once more rational and more Christian to give up the cheap and easy habit of adverse criticism, and try to find out the elements of permanent value in the work of every man.

On the other hand, I think there is some room for the growth of charity on the side of prohibitionists and total abstainers. The fact that one never drank a glass of wine in all his life scarcely entitles him to harsh judgments upon those who have. If he thinks it a sin, he ought to abstain. If he discovers a tendency to excess in that direction, he ought to abstain. If his freedom hurts a weaker brother, he ought to abstain. But he has no right to make his conscience a rule for everybody, nor to refuse alliance with those who, while differing from him in some particulars, may be just as true exponents of temperance as he is, and just as eager to stamp out the ruinous effects of intemperance from our beloved land.

Desiring as I do to bring this whole matter before you in a frank and straight-forward way, and believing that the cause of truth is never

served by concealments or exaggerations, I have mentioned some things which, to some extent, may account for the fact that Ontario is not as profoundly stirred on the subject of the Referendum as we might wish that it should be. But the practical question remains. What shall be our vote on December 4th? There may be mixed motives in the presentation of this Act. There may be difficulties in the enforcement of it. There may even be doubt in some minds whether it is the best way of approaching the question. But are these sufficient grounds for apathy, or for a vote in the negative? For my own part, I think not. It must be clearly borne in mind that this Act is one of restriction rather than prohibition; that it does not interfere with a reasonable measure of personal liberty; that it is to be dealt with on its merits as a vehicle of moral reform, and not simply as a piece of political legislation.

Its strong point, it seems to me, is its attack upon the bar-room. Most of you will be prepared to admit that we have too many bar-rooms, and that the absurd and baneful "treating" system helps to keep them going. Many a young man's downward career has begun there. He may have had no great desire for liquor, but he thinks he must stand in with the others, and take his turn in spending money though his health and happiness go with it. I can believe that some saloon-keepers would like to be engaged in a better business; for it makes little difference that a man's calling is legalized if he cannot respect himself so long as he takes part in it. The bar-

room is useless even where it is not positively ruinous. It is an economic burden on the community for which there is no adequate equivalent. It unsettles the habits, it reduces working power, it opens the door to other temptations, it shatters into fragments the peace of home, it often leads to an untimely and dishonored grave. O if we could hear to-night the wail of mothers over their boys who started out with as much promise, and of wives over husbands whose early love has been quenched in the fumes of alcohol; if we could invade the solitude of many a despairing soul, and take the testimony of those whose fortunes have been squandered, whose health has been broken, whose brightest hopes are fled away forever, we should need no other argument to prove that the drinking-saloon is a curse to our manhood, and that patriotism, not less than Christianity, calls upon us to put it down!

For this reason alone, I intend on the fourth of December to vote in the affirmative, and I shall be glad to hear that you do likewise. At the same time, I issue no mandate to others. All I ask is that you thoughtfully consider the whole matter, and then do what you believe is right, remembering that you are responsible to your fellows, and responsible to your God!

As a minister of Jesus Christ, it is my duty and my privilege to add a few words more. The Church, as a Church, while allowing freedom to its individual members, is not necessarily called upon to accept any legislation as complete and final. But the Church is called upon to illustrate

and enforce everywhere the principles of that blessed Gospel which is able to make us wise unto salvation. I earnestly appeal to each one of you, and especially to young men, to learn the grandeur of self-control, for that is the real meaning of the word "temperance." Companions, social usages, liquor sellers, may have their share of blame if you depart from the paths of sobriety. But, after all, you are mainly responsible for keeping in subjection your baser appetites. No laws of any kind will remove from earth the stern need of personal discipline. Even if we close the saloons, we shall have to see to it that fashionable customs have less "whiskey and soda" in them, and that not only men but women are delivered from the awful perils of social debauchery. The poor drunkard is the last result of a course of gradual degradation. He is not made all at once. He does not dream of ever going to excess when he begins his dalliance with the intoxicating bowl. Little by little the appetite grows, the will is enfeebled, the conscience is depraved, the finer ambitions overthrown, until alas! alas! he is led captive by the devil at his will.

O how shall this be cured, this deep-seated weakness in presence of which human laws have proved their insufficiency? Outward restraints may be of some service. The wise physician may find something to do. The patient friend may bring his stores of counsel and sympathy. But if we want to triumph over all that is evil, we must seek the aid of the Strong One, who alone is able to subjugate our lower passions so that they shall

not have dominion over us. It is the mission of the Lord Christ not only to make us "safe" in the future, but to teach us how to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. Whoever else has left us, He remains. Whoever else has lost hope, He still believes to the uttermost. Whoever else has ceased to care, His love endures forever. Because He answers the cry of the groaning spirit, and unites our human need to His Divine sufficiency, therefore He is the supreme Deliverer from the vice of intemperance and every other kind of evil, translating us out of the bondage of sin into the glorious freedom of the children of God.